

An Overview of English Poor Law

Beginning in 1597, the English government responded to the increasing number of impoverished citizens by passing a series of laws to provide employment, food, and shelter to be distributed by the local parish. Over the next two centuries, as the population grew and industrialization changed the nature of labor, the system strained to keep up with the demands. In 1834, the poor law was amended, and the workhouse became the central means of providing food and work to the poor.

Objectives

To understand what the poor law was, and the dates associated with it; to discuss how these laws might have affected your ancestors; and to learn what records come from the Poor Law.

Historical Context of the Old Poor Law

Pre-1534	Monasteries provide shelter for travelers, rent out their land to farmers, and collect tithes to distribute to the poor.
1534	Henry VIII breaks away from the Catholic Church and makes the new Anglican Church the official church of England. In the process, he dissolves the monasteries and claims their land for the Crown.
Mid-1500s	England's population grows by nearly 25%
1590s	The country faces several bad harvests, extreme inflation, and land enclosures preventing farmers from obtaining arable land.
1597	The Elizabethan government passes the Poor Law Act.

Main Purposes of the Law

- Establish an official system of supplying the poor with necessary money and food, rather than relying on charity.
- Limit begging and theft by categorizing the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor and enabling harsh punishment for crime.
- Help able-bodied poor to get work, often provided by poorhouses as an exchange for food and clothing.
- Establish the concept of “settlement” that required people to have paper documentation of their birth parish in order to receive aid.

Records from the Old Poor Law

These records are commonly referred to as Parish Chest Records.

- Account Books
- Bastardy Records
- Settlement Certificates
- Vestry Minutes
- Rate Books
- Apprenticeship Records

Historical Context of the New Poor Law

Mid-1700s	Increases in the Poor Rate increase negative perception of the poor, leading to a rise in the belief that requirements to obtain aid should be harsher.
1760	Industrial Revolution begins; mechanization replaces workers, people are drawn to cities to find work.
1782	Gilbert's Act is passed; it emphasizes building workhouses as the primary means of distributing aid.
Early-1800s	Poor harvests lead to extremely high rates of unemployment—the Old Poor Law is overburdened.
1834	The Poor Law Amendment Act is passed (New Poor Law begins).

Main Purposes of the Poor Law Amendment Act

- Place the responsibility of distributing aid on the national government via Poor Unions
- Enforce a more consistent system throughout the country
- Dissuade people from allowing themselves to become poor and relying on government assistance
- Lower Poor Rates for taxpayers after national outrage at the high levies
- Limit out relief so that the money expended on the poor could be made up through capitalizing on the labor of those in the workhouse
- Provide medical care for those that cannot afford it

Records from the New Poor Law

These records were produced by the workhouse unions.

- Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records
- Workhouse infirmary records
- Registers of births, baptisms, and deaths
- Board of Guardians records
- Poor Law Schools
- Out or Outdoor Relief
- Pauper Lunatic Asylum Records